

## Who is Looking Out for the Best Interest of Kids?

As commissioner, I have no authority to intervene in the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union (SVSU) strike or any other local contract negotiation. However, I believe I have a responsibility to speak up on behalf of the students. In 2005, as the superintendent of the Colchester School District, I experienced firsthand the impact of a strike on the community, the school board, teachers and staff, but most importantly on the students.

If we ever hear anything about the impact of strikes on students, it is typically about sports. During the current strike, seemingly due to the voices of students, varsity sports have continued to occur. However, I am more concerned about the impact that missed school has on the academic progress and well-being of kids.

Many Vermont students depend on the school day to meet very basic needs. More than one-third of the Vermont students are eligible for free or reduced price meals, and strikes can hinder their ability to access them. In this case, the Abbey Group and the SVSU have distributed food to families at an alternate site to ensure those students do not go hungry.

Beyond the direct impact of students losing access to their education, this has a ripple effect for many students. Students who take AP classes can fall behind the AP curriculum, which is set on a timetable for a national test which is given on a set day. Students who may be struggling in school lose critical instructional time. Students who have special needs lose that support. Media reports also note the impact that this particular strike is having on students' college entrance work, as essays go unread and letters of recommendation go unwritten.

Families are extremely stressed during a strike in finding appropriate and affordable care for their children. During my time in Colchester, I knew of parents who had to take unpaid leave time to be able to be with their children, which puts significant financial strain on the entire family. Those who cannot find proper care are then forced to leave their children alone.

So, what do we do about it? I am not taking sides on local contract issues, and everyone needs to understand that this is the business side of education. But the business side should still be able to occur without impacting students and families.

Vermont is one of only 13 states, and the only one in New England, that allows teachers to strike. I will be seeking support for legislation that does not allow teacher strikes, but also bans school board imposition of contracts. The negotiations need to continue, with school in session, no matter how long it takes to settle a contract.

Will this be easy or without critics? Of course not. Teachers' unions may complain that this would take away a significant bargaining option. School boards may be against losing their ability to impose contracts. But ultimately, schools, teachers, and school boards should be about students and student success. Strikes and contract impositions do nothing to benefit students. This idea levels the playing field for both sides.

It is time to stand up for the silent victims of strikes: students. We created these current rules, so we can change them. It is too late to do anything for the current strike, but we can have a positive impact on students during negotiations for years to come.

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